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ABSTRACT

This paper compares two approaches to teaching a course on alcohol abuse to high school students. The importance of the teacher's basic personal beliefs in selecting a theme and determining the goal of the course are described in terms of the two directions a course can take, i.e., that drinking is morally wrong, or that moderate, controlled drinking is acceptable. The influence of peers and the effect of a communication gap between teacher and students are considered. Of the two possible goals, total abstinence and prevention of alcoholism, the latter is suggested as the best approach for helping students make individual decisions about the use of alcohol as well as for developing a preventive-type, long-term program in general. (JAC)

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TEACHING ABOUT ALCOHOL ABUSE IN A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING: A PREVENTIVE OR TOTAL ABSTINENCE APPROACH?

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TEACHING ABOUT ALCOHOL ABUSE IN A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING: A PREVENTIVE OR TOTAL ABSTINENCE APPROACH?

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Teaching a course on alcohol abuse presents little difficulty for several reasons. In the first instance, there is an abundance of excellent material available for the initial preparation of course outline and related content. In addition to the academic material at the teacher's disposal, there are many kits and audio visual aids that can be used throughout the course. There are also knowledgeable professionals in the field, such as, sociologists and psychologists, who are always willing to support a course of this nature with their personal involvement, in order for it to be a successful one.

When we consider the above factors, it would be natural to assume a degree of optimism about any course on alcohol abuse being interesting and highly successful. This, however, is not necessarily the case.

Teachers of such a course can have all the necessary information and professional support at their disposal, yet very little in the way of effective teaching is going to take place until a basic personal element, related to the course, has been considered and decided upon —— before it is begun.

Teachers must decide on the general theme their course is going to take. Once such a theme is selected, the goal of the course is fairly well established. These two factors are pertinent to the success and effectiveness of any course dealing with alcohol and its abuse, especially in a high school setting. The reason is quite obvious. Without the teacher developing such a "mental set", the quality and quantity of educational material, along with professional support will produce minimal results. It is, then, of paramount importance that the teacher knows exactly what direction his/her course is going to take (i.e. re: theme and goal).

Generally, there are two directions that a course of this nature can take and each one entails a specific theme and goal. They are, as follows:

DIRECTION A

Theme: Drinking is socially and morally wrong.

Goal: Total abstinence.

DIRECTION B

Theme: Moderate controlled drinking is socially accepted and morally tolerated.

Goal: Prevention of alcoholism.

CHOOSING DIRECTION A

There is no doubt that a number of teachers will choose Direction A for course presentation. However, there are a number of major factors that make this direction a rather difficult one to follow

and one the writer feels can end, in the majority of cases, with teachers concluding they have failed to provide a successful and effective course on alcohol abuse.

Peer Influence:

Teen-agers are highly influenced by their peer group. In a true sense, they are "other-directed people" in that the peer group is the major source of influence for them. There is, then, pressure for behavioral conformity. Such external pressure is extremely strong and as peer group attitudes and behaviour are continually being modified and changed in relation to changing social conditions, so does that of the individual. When these forces are at play, the teen-ager is truly more a part of the group——rather than "part of himself" (i.e., general behavior and decision-making are built around influences outside the realm of their own identity).

It should come as no surprise, then, when the majority of students in any class taking a course on alcohol abuse are convinced that drinking does them no harm, that it is a social activity of significant importance and without voicing the notion, they feel it is symbolic of adulthood to "have a few drinks". They come to the course with a rather rigid, pre-conceived frame of reference that drinking is an acceptable social activity and to be part of their particular peer group necessitates participation in drinking activity. The unfortunate few who do not drink are labelled as "dead-beats", the "squares of the school".

The Communication Gap:

The teacher who is setting out to coerce his/her students to stop drinking, in most cases, will be somewhat restricted in relation to the topic. He/she will not view the problem as the students in the class do. Thus, "logical presentation" will be met with students' "logical rebuttal". It is up to the teacher to extend a willingness to listen to what is being said and more important that it is treated as "verbal sense". I question such a happening taking place if the teacher has set out with Direction A in mind.

What develops then is an atmosphere of tension in the class, accompanied by a degree of resentment and frustration (between the teacher and his students). Certainly there will exist a degree of subtle mockery (i.e. who is this teacher who wants to change our personal outside activities, when we know nothing is wrong with them?) Quite simply put, caution is suggested if a teacher is setting out to get his students to stop drinking; especially when it can be interpreted as an infringement on individual choice. And this is exactly the attitude that will develop if a sense of "converting me" is seemingly transmitted to those students taking such a course.

With a total abstinence approach, the probability of negative attitudes will exist, contributing to the breakdown of an interaction between teacher and student; between the young and the old. As pointed out, if nothing concrete or logical is said, then it cannot be digested as meaningful material no matter how many words "bombard youth". If dogmatism, intolerance and degrading remarks etc., are communicated, then they will be met with similar reaction by youth. A communicatioal vacuum or gap, is an inevitable result.

Social Change:

There is no question that over the last twenty five years we have witnessed rapid social changes, bringing with them a relaxing of values and tradition. When tradition and values change, so will attitudes and behaviour. It is an uncomfortable fact that the teen-ager of today has been caught up in this extension of "social mobility". The mass media reinforces such change. Any media commercial dealing with alcohol use demonstrates how varied social activities and drinking have become synonomous concepts.

CHOOSING DIRECTION B

This platform, or take-off point, provides teachers with an initial mental set that significantly reduces the probability of "head on collisions" with the teen-age students in their classes. Thus, an effective teaching program on the subject of alcohol abuse is far more likely to materialize.

A Social Happening:

The theme of Direction B, which contains a degree of acceptance (i.e., that drinking is a "social happening") and that to be an active participant is not morally wrong, adds a degree of elasticity to the program in that "moral limits" are not narrow and rigid. This provides for a much broader baseline from which students, as well as teachers, have an opportunity to discuss relevant issues involving their personal views and opinions on the subject. It is certainly a contrast to the basic approach of Direction A, where teachers usually provide facts and statistics which compel students to memorize and reproduce them either vertally, or on the printed page. Student involvement, then, significantly minimizes the possibility of such a dull, sterile and antagonistic academic atmosphere.

Bridging The Communication Gap:

Students must be willing to listen, absorb and think about the information they are receiving. They will not do this under an atmosphere of authoratative leadership, and that is exactly what happens when we pursue the direction that we are going to change the teen-agers attitudes and social behaviour because of what we are saying. There is no faster way to develop a communication gap. If static is contained in what is being transmitted to the teen-ager, then apathy and rejection of such verbalization will surely exist.

As mentioned, the theme of Direction B provides a healthy and mutual communication system to be developed. When this occurs, each student within a group is receptive to what is being said (and, just as important, we are receptive to the students' verbal responses, containing personal views and opinions.) It is at this point that a great deal of learning is going to take place because students will then be willing to listen, absorb and "think" about the information they are receiving.

A Thinking Program:

Through sound discussion and presentation of varied ideas, concepts and general principles of everyday living, each student has the opportunity to develop an internalized set of personal, social and moral values, allowing them to think about alcohol use with a degree of maturity; to make a personal decision whether it is a good or bad thing to do. It must be their choice. It cannot be ours!

Students learn to think as individuals. Decision-making comes from personal choice, rather than responding to peer group pressure and conformity to it. I suppose, in a sense, this is the bottom line in a course of this nature; to provide and allow each student the opportunity to "start thinking" about alcohol use, rather than getting them to "stop drinking".

The goal of a preventive type program then, is actually long-term in nature; a developmental one, in which students experience the formulization of internalized value systems, enabling them to decide just how far they wish to get involved in the drinking scene. A far more effective and lasting approach to the problem of alcohol abuse, then, is one in which total abstinence is advocated; involving a goal that demands more immediate (i.e. short-term) results.